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The documentary script as an oxymoron?

ABSTRACT

Brian Winston is a British screenwriter who focuses on documentaries; he won an Emmy Award in 1985 for his work on Heritage: Civilization and the Jews, Episode 8, 'Out of the Ashes' (1919–1947). Other credits include A Boatload of Wild Irishmen (2010). In his keynote address at the Screenwriting Research Network Potsdam conference in 2014, Winston, with passion and humour and his knowledge, addressed the 'script' and engaged the audience of academics, graduate students and industry practitioners in re-assessing what signifies a screenplay in the world of documentary filmmaking.

KEYWORDS

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script
outline
scenario
screen-idea
Fred Wiseman

Fred would call from Cambridge and say, 'I want to do a juvenile court', or 'I want to do a study of welfare.' And I would say, 'Terrific'.

Robert Kotlowitz (Editorial Director, WNET, New York)
(Benson and Anderson 1989: 310)

Throughout the 1970s, American filmmaker and documentarian Frederick Wiseman (*Titicut Follies* (1967), *Belfast, Maine* (1999), *National Gallery* (2014) and more) had a unique carte-blanche: multi-year contracts from the New York flagship public television station, WNET, to make movies more or less at his own pace with budgets of a largesse denied all his peers. He owed this to the patronage of the highly cultured programme chief at the station, the writer and ex-*Harper's* editor, Robert Kotlovitz.

It would be, of course, a grossly unfair simplification to blame the fact that all too often students in documentary film production classes seem surprised, if not offended, that non-fiction filmmaking might involve something (a script, an outline, prompts, a beat sheet or other narrative ideas) that was written before the finished work reaching the screen. A new Wiseman film, at this time, was so important to the network that it was used to premiere that year's television season on PBS as a whole. Even so, if a brief telephone call from filmmaker to funder was all that was needed by way of 'green-lighting' a film, why would that not do for them too? Were they not striving to be 'flies-on-the-wall'? Observational purity, by this light, required thinking of somewhere to film and gaining access to do so. Anything else smacked of interventionism that was deemed to pollute the documentary purity of the results. Moreover, students would not be alone in seeing any such writing – I shall call it the documentary 'script' – as an oxymoron. Many professional filmmakers (it would appear), all print journalists and unknown numbers of the public also seem to believe the existence of what they understand to be a 'script' to be a fatal bar to what they consider documentary authenticity. Kotlovitch was merely a celebrant of this view, but one with the rare power to be able to override the norms of mainstream documentary film funding and subsequent production aids and controls. As Damon Runyon might have put it, programme chief Kotlovitch could, at the cost of several tens of thousands of dollars, 'nod' producer Wiseman a 'yes' on the phone from New York to Boston.

Kotlovitch was no expert on documentary (Vitello 2012). Certainly, he showed little understanding of the Direct Cinema tradition (a documentary genre, originating in the late 1950s in Canada and the United States predicated on an assumption that hand-held sync equipment would allow for virtually unmediated filming of situations as they unfolded before the lens) and its pioneers on whom Wiseman, a lawyer and aspiring theatrical producer, had latched:

Fred (Wiseman) seemed to me to be so unique in his approach, and so unique in what he had already achieved, that anything I might have to say conceptually would be absolutely gratuitous... So the agreement was that we would provide him with a certain amount of production money every year which came out of our discretionary funds... So funding was assured....

(Benson and Anderson 1989: 310)

As Ian Macdonald points out there is an element of trust here, one that is crucial to 'screen-work':

What Wiseman knew was that his status with Kotlovitch was so high, as trusted supplier, and that their shared understanding of the system and the received wisdom/doxa about its practice, meant that he did not need to know the detail of the screen idea; only that Wiseman was proposing it.

(2015)

A succession of canonical observational, non-interventionist documentaries emerged, apparently 'script'-less, to become a benchmark of documentary legitimacy. The men (and at this point they all were men) Wiseman was

following were equally given to downgrading any thought of prior organization – e.g. a ‘script’. The prevailing idea was: obtain access to persons, location and sources – that was all one needed.

The anglophone documentary had been defined in 1933 by the Scottish pioneer, John Grierson, as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ allowing the filmmaker to be both reporter/observer and creative director. The new Direct Cinema documentarists, such as Wiseman, eschewed the interventionism that this permitted but this did not mean that Grierson’s classic definition of documentary was no longer in play (1933: 8). On the contrary, Wiseman might have been a non-interventionist observer at the moment of filming (to obtain ‘actuality’), but he was an artist of high repute in the editing room (where ‘creative treatment’ was still deemed to come into play). This is, of course, itself dangerously oxymoronic. It can be asked: what can logically be left of ‘actuality’ (aka evidence), after it has been ‘creatively treated’ (organized and edited) by the documentarist? That oxymoron, though, speaks to the basic claim on the real, an overall problematic that is not in question here. Rather, I am concerned with the supposed ‘script’/documentary opposition that is oxymoronic at another level. It is not the fundamental contradiction of actuality and treatment but the more detailed problem of ‘treatment’ articulated in some specific way (‘script’) contaminating (as it were) the captured actuality as evidence.

It would be no more correct to lay the blame for this ‘script’/documentary oxymoron on Direct Cinema practitioners than on Kotlovitz personally. The oil-and-water view of ‘script’ and documentary antedates the 1960s. Rejecting the idea that documentaries are, or can be, legitimately ‘scripted’ seems to be an essential factor ensuring their claim on the real. In fact, the documentary ‘script’ as an oxymoron is central to the founding Flaherty myth.¹

Consider the following anecdote: even when forced into more conventional filmmaking, as, say with *Industrial Britain* (1931), commissioned by John Grierson at the British government’s Empire Marketing Board’s film unit, Robert Flaherty ‘refused point-blank’ to write a script: ‘He had never written a script before and he was not going to start now for any civil servant’ (Rotha 1983: 101). Having been pressured by Grierson, Flaherty gave him:

... a thick wad of paper. On the top sheet were the words in Flaherty’s heavy hand, ‘INDUSTRIAL BRITAIN: A Film About Craftsmen.’ On page 2 were the words: ‘A SCENARIO’ and underneath, ‘Scenes of Industrial Britain.’ Nothing more.

(Rotha 1983: 101, original emphasis)

However, in the Flaherty papers in the Butler Library at Columbia University in New York City, there is a totally professional ‘PRELIMINARY SCENARIO for the proposed Film “Craftsmanship”’ subtitled ‘(British Industry)’, a dozen pages long and signed by Flaherty (1931, original emphasis). The film *Industrial Britain* starts, as does Flaherty’s typed document, with a shot of ‘the arms, the arms of an old windmill’. The written scenario goes on to deal (as does the film) with the persistence of old crafts. Therefore the need to insist that nothing is written in documentary production is troublesome for documents in this case clearly exist despite the fact that they are treated as a species of inconvenient fact and are, for the most part, ignored in the received history.²

But no more can the ‘script-less’ film as a marker of documentary difference be laid at Flaherty’s door than at the door of Direct Cinema practitioners.

1. Robert Flaherty (1884–1951) directed a feature using non-actors *Nanook of the North* (1921–1922). This is conventionally regarded as the ‘first’ documentary. Flaherty’s *oeuvre* – *Nanook plus Moana* (1926), *The Man of Aran* (1934), *Louisiana Story* (1946–68) are central to the anglophone documentary cannon.
2. And, one can add, Flaherty anyway knew how to write scripts. There is a totally professional silent feature script in the Columbia papers written for 20th Century Fox. The project was a fictional ‘Romeo & Juliet’ tale of Ancoma and Hopi native Americans. It was never completed – in fact, it was barely begun. Actually, Flaherty was a rather fine writer as, for example, the voice-overs of his last films attest (and as Leacock reports [2011: 176]).

3. Dziga Vertov (David Kaufman) (1896–1951) was a major Soviet experimental newsreel and documentary filmmaker who argued that the camera could be used as a 'Kino-Eye' to penetrate, with the use of techniques such as reversed motion, superimpositions, etc., surface realities. He stands, therefore, in opposition to the Flaherty/Grierson/Direct Cinema tradition of unproblematic observation
4. For one thing, he kept this 'script' from them.



Figure 1: Winston documentary script as oxymoron, *Industrial Britain*, 1931.

The alternative (and, until recently, marginalized) Vertovian documentary tradition was also party to such claims.³ *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), now anointed 'the greatest documentary of all time' by the 2014 *Sight and Sound* poll (Anon. 2014), is famously (according to its opening titles) not only an 'unplayed film' (i.e. without professional actors), but it is also 'without script'. This juxtaposition points to a process of osmosis: 'without script' has become inexorably intertwined with 'unplayed'. Thus in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's self-conscious revival of Vertovian reflexivity as *Cinéma vérité – Chronique d'un été*, France, 1960 – the first words spoken are: 'C'est film n'a pas jouer pas les acteurs' and, implicitly, this means there is no script either.

Yet this is fundamentally illogical as the documentary archive, certainly outside of the Direct Cinema/*Cinéma vérité* era, reveals. 'Scripts', i.e. lists, outlines, scenarios, detailed instructions (including on occasion dialogue), could be written and used as a basis of directing the non-professional actors before the camera. Before the 1960s, the sync dialogue in a finished film could well have been scripted. In, say, *Fires Were Started...* (1943) conversations had been noted by Jennings and his 'story-collaborator' Maurice Richardson, while researching (Winston 1999: 27–29). Jennings' genius was that, somehow, he managed to coax his non-professional actor firefighters into ad-libbing as their own words what he and Richardson had previously heard and written-up (Winston 1999: 32).⁴

But there is an even more obvious – indeed, elephant-in-the-room – factor demonstrating that, despite all this contrary rhetoric, 'script' and documentary can and do, in some way or another, go together. The mainstream is replete not just with submerged prior or parallel documentation conditioning the logistics and affording the final scaffolding of a film. A 'script' is, very often, completely overt – in plain sight (and hearing) in the form of commentary. Not all documentary voice-over can be written by E. M. Forster and spoken by Michael Redgrave (as in Jennings' masterpiece *Diary for Timothy*, 1944–1945), but one must understand that even at more prosaic levels the needs of documentary. These include the writing in various ways through all the processes of production.

CU: {Newspaper headline}: 'Major German Attack: American Line Holed'

Montage: train, countryside, cu engine-driver ('Bill'), snow-covered fields, tree

Commentator (Michael Redgrave, voice-over): In those days before Christmas, the news was bad and the weather was foul. Death and darkness; death and fog. Death across those few miles of water for our own people and for others, for enslaved and broken people. The noise of battle getting louder. And death came by telegram to many of us on Christmas eve. Until out of the fog dawned... loveliness.... whiteness – Christmas Day.

5. This argument is made at greater length in Winston (2014b).

At one level, the reason for obfuscation – for denying the self-evident legitimacy of such writing as a documentary 'script', is obvious. Script-less-ness re-enforces the claim on the real. It is virtual shorthand for a guarantee that no improper prior constraints on the material have been in place to taint the film's 'documentary value'. But the naivety of such an assumption only works if an essentialist vision of what constitutes a 'script' is adopted. That is what I challenge here.

Let us admit that at the outset the documentary eschews 'screenplays' as conceived, say, by the likes of Syd Field with his simplistic 'three act structure' mantra (2005). However, the absence of such a 'screenplay' per se is, actually, irrelevant. It is certainly the case that documentaries are not bound by formulaic structures. This absence, though, says very little because the 'screenplay', so identified, cannot conceivably be considered the only way for the cinema to get from idea to screen. It is not, and this means that absence of 'screenplay' from the documentary is no bar to the possibility of documentary 'scripts' taking other forms. It is not helpful to see a sort of binary existing between, on the one hand, a Wiseman-ian phone call and, on the other, Field-ian written texts. The point is that the phone call and the fiction-film 'screenplay' are not black or white alternatives. They represent the ends, if you will, of a continuum wherein lies what might be considered the documentary 'script'. The documentary 'script' is located in the process whereby what was in Wiseman's mind when he made his calls to WNET – his 'screen-idea' – was translated into 'screen-work', to use Ian Macdonald's terms (2011: 212–14). What preparations, beyond gaining access, had Wiseman made (or was to make) for the production, and how did he note these down – or otherwise remember them? My contention is that somehow, in some way, a 'script' or something very like in functionality, is as much a characteristic of the mainstream documentary as it is of the fiction film.

SCREEN IDEA

This is not, though, to deny that documentary is different from fiction. There is the essential of 'witness'. Unlike the imagined 'worlds' of the fictional film, as Nichol's has put it: 'Documentary offers access to a shared historical construct. Instead of a world [of fictional imagining], we are offered access to the [actually existing] world' (Nichols 1992: 109, original emphasis, parentheses added). 'The world' is brought to the documentary screen via processes of prior witness (Winston 2005: 141–43, 2014a: 8).⁵

What there is not, however, as mark of difference, is narrative.

Narrative is a characteristic of the 'order' *cinema* (in the 'phylum' 'art' of the 'class' *culture*) and is shared by two '*familiae*' within it: *fiction* and *documentary*

(Winston 2014a: 267–72). The absence of a formal written ‘script’ is no guarantee of documentary ‘difference’ from fiction and, conversely, its presence will not undercut documentary authenticity. Nor does narrative’s presence, of itself, in the documentary imply any improper fictionality as both ‘familiae’ are, essentially, narrative-driven. As Grierson had observed when first articulating his documentary idea while in America in the late 1920s:

...the Hearst press and its imitators on every level of journalism had turned into a ‘story’ what we in Europe called a ‘report’. They had in fact made the story – that is to say, a dramatic form – the basis of their means of communication.... All I did in my theory of documentary film was to transfer that concept to filmmaking, and declare that in the actual world of our observation there was always a dramatic form to be found.

(Beveridge 1978: 29)

Half a century and more later, Nichols can then note correctly that documentary ‘operates in the crease between life as lived and life as narrativised’ (1986: 114); narrative is then the driver necessitating the documentary ‘script’ – or its like.

This is exactly illustrated by Flaherty’s procedures in *Nanook of the North* (1920–1921), often referred to as the first documentary.

There had been long form non-fiction films, with coherent narratives, before this but their narrative logic had been, as it were, generated by their subject matter (e.g. a journey or the duration of an event). For example, the 77 (or so) minutes of *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), say, had such internal logic: battles start and run their course. Flaherty’s contribution was to eschew such simple modalities to create a narrative from his footage of everyday Inuit life that reflected the more complex norms of dramatic storytelling: in effect, ‘creatively’ to ‘treat’ his ‘actuality’ footage.

He was aware of the success of the photographer Edwin S. Curtis’ pre-World War I film, *Land of the Head Hunters* (1913/1914). This film had meshed



Figure 2: Winston documentary script as oxymoron, *Nanook of the North*, 1920.

a non-professionally acted fictional melodrama (for which Curtis took a writing credit) with more ethnographically authentic (albeit reconstructed) 'actuality' footage taken among the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) people of the Northwestern Pacific coast. Curtis had described such footage as being 'documentary material' and films using such images as 'documentary works' (Holm and Quimby 1980: 113–14.). (And this a decade earlier than Grierson, who is usually credited with the first use in English, in connection with film, of the word: 'documentary'.)

At this same time, in the Arctic, in contrast to Curtis, Flaherty had been shooting footage, later destroyed, which he himself was to describe in the 1950s as 'utterly inept'. It was also of First Nation life, 'unplayed', but its material consisted of:

... simply a scene of this and a scene of that, no relation, no thread of a story or continuity whatever, and it must have bored the audience to distraction. Certainly it bored me.

(Rotha 1983: 27) (correct)

When he returned to the Arctic after World War I, he knew he needed a dramatic narrative (*à la In the Land of the Headhunters*) and, in his seeking to create one from the footage he then began to assemble, the documentary film in the Griersonian sense was born.

One can see that process at work on the screen. Flaherty begins to integrate the episodes he had filmed (capturing a white Arctic fox-cub, hunting a seal, building an igloo, etc.) into a coherent drama. Unlike Curtis, though, while filming, Flaherty had eschewed inventing incidents. Instead he restricted himself to quotidian scenes that he himself had witnessed and reconstructing events he had been told about on previous pre-World War I expeditions, or that had been recalled by the Inuit he involved in the production: 'Nanook' thus lives in 'the world'. This was new – not a fiction with 'documentary materials' but witnessed (albeit often reconstructed) non-fiction. This did not mean that haphazard observation – surveillance, say – would yield a movie. That required narrative and narrative required planning, which in turn leant itself to writing in some form or another.

To make his observed footage also 'dramatic', in the cutting room, Flaherty ignores the actual chronology of these shoots, making causal connections between them where they had been none. He even splits sequences (e.g. the family going to bed and getting up in the igloo) using the pieces at different moments of the story that he is telling. Eventually, the sequences are organized to reach a causal climax as a fight among the huskies dangerously delays the protagonists so that they are forced to race for shelter in a blizzard (or so the *written* intertitles tell us). Finding shelter safely and going to bed in, supposedly, a different igloo from the one previously seen as being built, gives the film closure.

Thus, however theoretically analysed, *Nanook of the North* becomes a classic narrative. It obeys, for example, Tzvetan Todorov's notion of 'transformation' from equilibrium through disruptions to restoration (1981: 41–45). Or it reflects Barthes' concept of the hermeneutic – i.e. 'a variety of chance events which can either formulate a question or delay its answer' (1990: 17). In *Nanook's* case the final question is: will the protagonists survive a blizzard? Yes, they do – via 'a series of actions, natural, logical, linear' (Barthes 1990: 158). The end.

Despite all the serendipitous, unpredicted and uncontrolled possibilities of documentary filming, uncorseted by 'screenplay', forethought clearly figures in the gathering of these sequences. We know that the filming of the incidents was not unplanned nor were they unwitnessed inventions. Moreover, these preplanned sequences themselves were filmed in a structured fashion in the sense that David MacDougall has identified. MacDougall suggests that all non-fiction filming is subjected to 'processes of selection and interpretation' and this becomes 'increasingly necessary during filming in order to represent complex events' (1998: 181, 182). One needs, from the outset at the moment of shooting, to be providing what he calls 'diagnosis' and this is as true of documentary filming as of filming a fiction-film screenplay. It marks the difference between the film camera and the surveillance camera. With fiction *and* non-fiction filming, the actual framing of shots to cover the action, whether pre-scripted or not, is flexible: variants of POV, reverses, cutaways and more. Even with the continuous hand-held Direct Cinema shot, all these can be found within it to enable a sequence to be cut. They were all to hand in Flaherty's footage and such variety was to be a constant of documentary rushes thereafter.

As he sat at his editing bench, then, Flaherty was faced with a *tabula rasa*. He was already limited. Immanent elements of structure were present as he slowly assembled the film shot by shot. So the next question: at what point did an overall structure emerge and was there ever anything that could be called a 'script'?

There is nothing in the record to suggest that Flaherty ever wrote anything down – apart from the intertitles. The best evidence is that, despite knowing that he needed more than 'a scene of this and a scene of that', he worked without much, if any, conscious prior idea (to be Syd Field-ian) of a 'narrative arc'. Nevertheless, after 29 minutes of unrelated scenes (e.g. fishing, hunting a walrus, the trading post) a story of a dramatic hunting trip with a clear chronology emerges following an intertitle: '*Winter...*'. What we see on the screen, however, is not what happened: Nanook did not clamber over ice-flows eventually capturing a silver Arctic fox-cub before hunting a seal, then build an igloo only to be caught the following day in a blizzard because a dog fight delayed finding shelter. At least, this is not what happened causally; the juxtaposing of sequences would appear to have occurred to Nanook finally only in the cutting room as Flaherty had shot them initially without having such a narrative in mind. Because the 'screen idea' coalesced around the hunting trip, the unconnected incidents of the film's first half-hour can be explained as off-cuts, events that would not 'fit' in the story of the hunt. 'Nanook' could not be inland building igloos while fishing and hunting walrus by open water. He could not be clowning at the trader's post while capturing fox cubs. So some sequences, despite having been planned and shot, were discarded from the narrative but kept in the film as a *mélange* to set the scene for the hunt.

Whether *ice-flows/fox cub/igloo/seal/dog fight/blizzard* was ever written down at some point or not becomes moot. There is a *de facto* 'script' for the second part of the film and Flaherty probably kept it in initially in his head. Eventually, though, he did come to writing. The chronology and causalities involved in the hunting trip narrative all came to be expressed in the words of his intertitles. For the film's first half-hour, these merely caption the image, for example: 'This is the way Nanook uses moss for fuel'. For the narrative, however, the intertitles do far more: 'It is now getting dark and the family are a long way from shelter, but the dogs cause a dangerous delay'. Whether or

not there was previous 'scripting' on paper, these later intertitles cumulatively constitute a written 'script'.

My contention is that this final expression of the film's story – its narrative – has to have been prefigured. The final intertittling of the silent cinema (or voice-over commentary) reflects this; however, even in their absence, prefiguring is still present. 'Script' underpins all documentaries, including the most stridently 'unmediated' observational, for narrative, an essential documentary maker, cannot be created without it.

NARRATIVE

Yelizaveta Svilova sits in *The Man with a Movie Camera* editing room in Odessa at her editing bench surrounded by meticulously organized lengths of film – separate shots – hanging against backlit ground-glass. Uncut shots are stored as shelved rolls, their subjects carefully labelled – in writing.

It is in the editing room that markers of a 'script' (outside of the film-frame and usually and certainly most professionally in writing) will most likely appear, whether or not the production has hitherto eschewed any semblance of formal scripting. No paper (or its digital equivalent) might yet have been produced, no pitch document, no scenario, no shooting script, no backs-of-envelop scribbles nor any computer-generated 'post-it' notes, and yet some system of identification is crucial. The reality of narrative-building requires Svilova-style 'housekeeping',⁶ on paper or, nowadays, with the meta-data file tagging of stored digital footage.⁷ The listing and tagging will provide the building blocks for further stages of organization. The narrative might be subject to constant revision in detail but an overall shape, a de facto 'script', will always be in mind and often include formal written elements.

So the supposedly 'script'-less Fred Wiseman, after the phone call, after the days, weeks and months of filming, faced with many hours, days' worth, of canned rushes needs to find a way to deal with his material. The serendipity that is implicitly and spuriously required by the 'script'/documentary oxymoron will not suffice for such a task. 'When I'm editing [Wiseman once revealed], I try to work out a very elaborate theory which I set-down as I talk to myself: for example – "Well, this fits this way" and "that fits that way"' (Graham 1976: 43). Wiseman, a film editor of genius (like Svilova), here speaks to the need first articulated by Flaherty – to overcome 'a scene of this and a scene of that'; in effect, to find a narrative (a very elaborate theory) to allow sequences that he has now to hand to be logically conjoined in a culturally satisfying – and attention compelling – fashion. They must 'fit' – and a record of how they might fit needs to be 'set-down', somewhere, somehow, at some point.

Documentary film cutting rooms became festooned with pieces of paper arranged (rather as in a police procedural's incident room) – and rearranged – to highlight what 'fits'. Svilova's rolls of film, abstracted into easily rearranged notecards on a pin board, become, exactly, the basis of a 'script'. (Obviously, sorting digital files on-screen is a fluid and flexible equivalent.)

This says nothing to the extent to which the connections have been previously suggested in writing, logically articulated at the editing bench or more intuitively felt. As Wiseman explained, even with intuition, 'rationalization frequently comes after the connection exists' (Graham 1976: 43). With Flaherty (as far as we know) this can indeed be the case and documentary film editors certainly exhibit intuitive skills at making connections. The point is not self-consciousness or intuition but, simply, the 'connection'. Connection

6. I am very indebted to my colleague Chris Hainstock for his experienced professional insight on these matters. He points out that: 'Technology is rapidly offering new possibilities, with speech recognition, automatic live translation etc, but still, the use of note-cards with written details of the various sections within a factual film prevails' (private communication).

7. Indeed, despite the possibilities of electronic search, interview transcripts, for example, will likely still be on paper.



Figure 3: Documentary script as oxymoron, *Hospital* (1969).

between shots and then between sequences is the key to narrative. In professional documentary 'screen work' the norm is for this to involve written aids and intuition. Wiseman's 'setting down', my experience suggests, is the far more usual mode – as without it any film runs the danger of falling apart – of becoming a mere assemblage of rushes.

'Narrative', one can note, is no more limited to chronological causality – i.e. *A*, preceding *B*, causes it – than is film in general to 'three act structure'. Such straightforward connectivity between sequences is often missing from documentary and this leads to another claim of documentary 'difference': that it is 'non-narrative'. By this view, 'achronicity' (Genette 1980: 84), the *failure* to maintain chronological causality, is deemed fatal to narrative. This cannot stand, though. Just as documentary avoids the screenplay, so it can embrace achronicity. The former does not mean that documentary is without narrative, not does the latter. For one thing, chronological causality is far from absent in documentary although often it shows only 'a relatively close fidelity' to it (Grant 1992: 22). Even when, say, 'Wiseman's films are clearly structured according to principles other than chronology' (Grant 1992: 21), it does not mean that they are 'non-narratives'. In such instances, his narratives can be seen as 'the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time' (Sternberg 2003: 328).

Consider *Hospital* (1969): after an operating theatre 'tease', the sequences, shot in the A&E and bridged by an iterative image of a sanitation man going about his business, move – without any chronological causality – from the unthreatening (e.g. a hearing-aid problem) through escalating medical and social difficulties (child abuse, stabbing and more) to death (Winston and Person 1982). Wiseman's 'this fits this way – that fits that way' insights underlying his 'screen idea' reflect a received hierarchy of social deviancy that 'disqualifies the criteria of mere sequentiality and logical connectedness'

as being central to narrative (Fludernik 1996:19). Instead, the films illuminate Monica Fludernik's suggestion that understandings of the world, social perceptions, narrative and reception conventions – what audiences bring to the business of deconstructing any text – can create narrative without chronological causality.

Nevertheless, the underlying notion of the impropriety of the documentary script, re-enforced by the stridency of Direct Cinema's non-interventionist rhetoric, rendered the concept of 'non-narrative' attractive so much so that 'narrative' becomes simply a synonym for fiction. A leading textbook could follow this logic, in edition after edition, by discussing documentary in terms of 'non-narrative formal systems' of cinema (Bordwell and Thompson 1996: 128–65), such as the 'categorical documentary'. A categorical documentary about a grocery store 'might show the meat section, the produce section, the checkout counters and other categories within the store' (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 89–90). Or, to give another example, a film about butterflies 'might use scientific groupings, showing one type of butterfly and giving information about its habits, then showing another with more information, and so on' (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 91).⁸

The problem is, simply, that these are not documentaries – they are mere assemblages of rushes: Flaherty's 'a scene of this and a scene of that'. The distinction between documentary films (necessarily narratives) and documentary footage (rushes) is lost.⁹ 'Non-narrative' films are therefore unsurprisingly illusive and the titles offered as examples do not convince. With *The River* (1937), for instance, the clear progression through space (e.g. from rivulets in the 'turkey-ridges of the Alleghenies' down to the expanses of the Mississippi delta) and in time (e.g. from white settlement through Civil War to twentieth-century floods) must needs be ignored (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 100–05). In Les Blank's *Gap-Toothed Women* (1987) the care with which he 'fitted' together his 40 interviewees to move from memory of childhood to thoughts on cancer and death is, in the name of 'non-narrative', equally unremarked (Bordwell and Thompson 2003). These films 'work' exactly to the degree that they are narratives. Otherwise 'non-narrative', as Dai Vaughan (another editor of genius) observed, always 'works better in the head than on the screen' (1983: 75).

We are thus led to the conclusion that what distinguishes documentary from the fiction film is not the simple presence or absence of narrative. Narrative is never absent in documentary films....

(Gyynn 1990: 154)

So, to stick with Wiseman, the claim can be rejected that: 'The overall structure of Wiseman's films is decidedly non-narrative (lacking closure, a diachronic trajectory...)' (Nichols 1978, 1981: 210). Even when the films lack overt chronological markers, they still achieve narrative closure. Sequences cannot be readily 'switched around in a variety of permutations' as some thought (e.g. Mamber 1974: 4). This might easily work in the head, but it certainly will not on the screen. 'The films' are simply not, as Mamber suggested, 'mosaic in structure'. Such supposed 'tessellation' discounts Wiseman's talent and it does so, as does the 'story/documentary' oxymoron, in the name of a claim of objective unmediated evidence. It ignores the reality that, actually, by the lights of more modern theory, the films – planned, structured and 'set down' – are narratives yet. The prefiguring that produces them needs forethought.

Whether or not it is 'written' is irrelevant.

8. In fact, documentaries on butterflies (as an instant search of YouTube – 'Butterfly Documentaries' – reveals) actually – indeed, stereotypically – use for their 'non-categorical' (as it were) dramatic stories the natural narrative of metamorphosis and/or the drama of the insects' migration. Linnaeus is not much in evidence.

9. Although not in ethnographic filmmaking. Here as David MacDougall suggests, 'record footage' or 'research' was quite clearly seen as different from the narrativized ethnographic documentary (1998: 181, 182).

SCREEN WORK

The first lesson for documentary film production students has to be that a phone call to the funders is insufficient to enable their 'screen idea' to reach the screen. They will learn soon enough how much paper and pitching it will take but what is of greater significance is that they come to appreciate how the apparent contradiction between 'script' and documentary can be resolved:

- Screen ideas require narrative to be uncovered in the processes of research and/or through understanding and experience. This all has to be put into some sort of logical order. One might hold all narrative intent in his or her head; however, it is unwise and will not work with funders. The screen idea thrives when 'set down'. It can be a list, an outline or an essay. Call it sequences, meld it into a scenario, work it up, but – by some means or other – 'set it down'.
- This can now be broken down into what needs to be shot to illustrate its argument. These elements (sequences) can now be arranged into a dramatic structure (a narrative). Write this down and one has a 'script'.
- What then happens before the lens during filming can be serendipitous but the footage will have a predetermined story function. Indeed, such functions can be illustrated by shooting material not originally envisaged in the 'script', but the resultant footage will still connect to the 'screen idea'.
- The screen work can then emerge in the cutting room. There will be more 'writing' and what has been filmed might (and indeed, in the name of evidence often should) differ from the initial script. The order of sequences, their putative connectivities envisaged in the script might (most likely will) change as the film is edited. But, overall will hover a documentary 'script' or something indistinguishable from it.

Without such process, merely 'a scene of this and a scene of that' will result. Terming these assemblages 'non-narrative' or 'mosaics' or whatever is inutile. The Audiences will always seek a story. They will see (or seek to see) 'life as narrativized' and narrativization must have 'scripts' – there is, actually, no oxymoron involved.

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